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DE RUEHLM #0288/01 0791356
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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7893
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0801
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7789
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5977
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000288

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/19/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PROVINCIAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS RISK
REPEATING FAILURES OF BATTICALOA ELECTIONS

REF: A. COLOMBO 00199

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 00248

Classified By: DCM James R. Moore, for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: During EmbOffs' visit to Batticaloa before the March 10 district-wide local council elections, political parties reiterated their concerns that the elections would not be free or fair. Paramilitaries contesting as political parties claimed to have disarmed, but local residents feared the weapons would reappear after the local elections. Parties' responses to the election results were mixed, with some leaders begrudgingly accepting the results and others (notably those of the TNA and UNP) denouncing them. The Foreign Ministry welcomed the completion of the elections as a triumph for democracy. The GSL has since announced that provincial council elections will be held in the entire Eastern Province on May 10. Embassy remains concerned that the short deadline will not provide enough time to resolve problems noted in the local elections process. However, a demonstration of political resolve on the part of the GSL to disarm all paramilitaries, accompanied by decisions by a broader spectrum of parties to contest the provincial elections, may yet create an environment for a fair poll that reflects popular will and produces a representative government. End Summary.

Views of Parties That Contested
the Local Elections

[1](#)2. (U) In the three days before the March 10 local elections, EmbOffs met in Batticaloa with the chief candidates of all parties contesting the elections (except EROS): the TMVP, EPDP, EPRLF, PLOTE, and SLMC. All parties except the TMVP expressed doubt that the elections could be free and fair. The TMVP, on the other hand, claimed that none of its candidates were forced to contest, and that all its members had already put down their weapons (these claims run counter, however, to several credible reports, ref b). When asked to describe what the party hoped to accomplish once in government, TMVP leader "Pradeep Master," after a

lengthy pause for reflection, cited the TMVP's desire to re-claim municipal properties in High Security Zones, and to "build trust" between the security forces and the people.

¶3. (U) The EPDP also claimed to have disarmed (contrary to credible reports), and complained that the TMVP had been blocking EPDP campaigning. In Arayampathy, an EPDP member was assaulted by TMVP member "Santhan," but the police did not act on the complaint. The EPDP expected the elections to be rigged, but said they hoped for 35 seats (in the final results, the EPDP coalition with EPRLF and PLOTE won 16 seats). The party planned to have poll monitors, but said that they could not send monitors to areas where the TMVP is powerful. According to EPDP, these monitors would be villagers, whose safety the party could not ensure when they returned home. EPDP also said that in Kokadicholai, a former PLOTE member named Paranthaman Gajendran was shot dead on March 4, 2008.

¶4. (U) The EPRLF lead candidate, reportedly quite popular, said that former TNA candidates were contesting as TMVP (corroborating previous reporting to EmbOffs). The candidate stressed that people's main concern in Batticaloa district is physical security) they are not yet thinking of development. In Kokadicholai, the main livelihood is cattle raising. However, due to security concerns, cattle farmers pasture their cattle in the jungle for 3 to 4 months, without contact with the outside world.

¶5. (U) According to PLOTE, on March 6 in Puthur, TMVP member Santhan distributed leaflets with a public warning to vote for the TMVP, otherwise "we will not support you in the

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future." In Arayampathy, TMVP members threatened PLOTE members while displaying weapons. The PLOTE candidate also claimed that in Kalawanchikudy, TMVP members entered the PLOTE office and intimidated party supporters. PLOTE has complained to the police but no action has been taken. The candidate added that in Karadiyanaaru, humanitarian agencies have been denied the necessary access to help people.

¶6. (U) According to the SLMC lead candidate, all parties except the TMVP faced restrictions on campaigning. He asserted that the SLMC did not want elections, but felt compelled to run to prevent the TMVP from contesting virtually unchallenged. The candidate said that he was forced to accept police protection. He received a letter on LTTE letterhead telling him to withdraw from the election, but believed the letter more likely came from the GSL, via the TMVP. Four days later, he received a letter on TMVP letterhead saying the Eastern Province belongs to the TMVP, that the TMVP rescued this territory, and Muslims cannot claim this land. The candidate believed that the LTTE carried out the killing of two TMVP cadres on a motorbike in Kalawanchikudy, but that the intended target of the attack was probably SLMC candidate Basheer Segudawood, who withdrew from the government in February. The candidate cited talks between the TNA and SLMC about jointly contesting the Provincial Council elections in Batticaloa District, and speculated that the LTTE believes the SLMC is trying to drive a wedge between the TNA and LTTE. The candidate noted complaints of assaults against SLMC candidates in Valachchenai, which he said were the responsibility of Deputy Minister Ameer Ali. He said the SLMC had appointed polling monitors in Muslim areas, but that the TMVP would not allow SLMC monitors in other areas. The SLMC felt that after the elections, they would be threatened by both the LTTE and TMVP (particularly TMVP member Santhan). The candidate firmly expected TMVP weapons to re-emerge after elections.

Reactions by Political Parties
to Election Results

¶7. (U) The main opposition UNP has had trouble articulating

a consistent position on the local elections. UNP Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe took to the streets dismissing the election as a sham in which UNP candidates would have faced death threats if they had contested. UNP national organizer S.B.Dissanayake (formerly JVP, then SLFP, now UNP and believed to be trying to get back to the SLFP) has been quoted as saying the UNP would have won if they had contested Batticaloa. UNP General Secretary of Tissa Attanayake (who has clashed recently with Ranil loyalists) stated the UNP must run at the provincial poll, and that not contesting is not a solution.

¶9. (U) In press reports, the EPDP stated, "the TMVP,s attempt to rig polls in the Batticaloa Municipal area was prevented due to the heavy deployment of security forces personnel. But in the remote areas the TMVP had been successful in rigging votes." The TNA rejected the elections as rigged. Many Tamil civil society leaders claimed that TNA MPs have been ineffective and have therefore lost the support of the people. However, given the level of TMVP intimidation, and the non-participation of the TNA because of justified concerns that their candidates might be assassinated, it is difficult to assess how much latent support exists for the party. TULF leader Anandasangaree accepted the result as legitimate.

Foreign Ministry Reaction to Election Results

¶10. (U) In a briefing for foreign missions on March 12, Minister of Foreign Affairs Rohitha Bogollagama welcomed the completion of the elections as a triumph for democracy,

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saying: "Firstly, it is an important milestone in the government's policy of restoring democratic rights to the people in areas that were previously dominated by the LTTE. Secondly, we are seeing the transition of the TMVP into the democratic political mainstream. Thirdly, the successful conclusion of this election augurs well for the planned Provincial Council elections that will follow this May in the entire Eastern Province as recommended by the 23 January 2008 proposals of the All Party Representative Committee (APRC)." PolOff (attending on behalf of Ambassador) asked whether the GSL would move to disarm the paramilitaries, now that they have entered the political process, and whether the GSL believed it could provide a conducive environment for broader participation by other parties in the provincial council elections in May. The Minister responded that there were no paramilitaries in Sri Lanka. He said it was understandable that the TNA, which has supported the political goals of the LTTE, would have trouble contesting in areas formerly controlled by the terrorists. Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona interjected that the Defense Secretary had given assurances that no one other than government security forces would be permitted to bear arms in GSL-controlled areas. The Japanese DCM asked when the government would move to implement the 13th Amendment according to its decision of January 23. Only the Pakistani Ambassador congratulated the government on holding a successful poll in the East.

Looking Ahead to Provincial Council Elections

¶11. (U) On March 14, the GSL announced plans to hold provincial council elections in the Eastern Province. Elections Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake said that nominations would be accepted from March 27 to April 3. The polling date is May 10. Elections will be held in Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts, for a total of 37 Provincial Council seats. Provincial councils in the north and east are part of the government's power-sharing plan. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1987) provided for establishment of the councils, but there have been no provincial council elections in the north and east since 1988. The earlier Northeastern Council was dissolved in 1990.

¶12. (U) The UNP, JVP, and SLMC have all announced that they will contest the provincial elections. The TMVP has not yet made a formal announcement, but they are widely expected to run, probably in alliance with other constituent government parties. UNP MP Jayalath Jayawardene told the press that the UNP's nomination board would be appointed after the Working Committee meeting on March 25. Leaders from the UNP and JVP have urged the GSL to demobilize armed groups. Both the UNP and JVP have a low support base in the Tamil-majority Batticaloa district. However, there is a significant Sinhala constituency in eastern Ampara district, and a Sinhalese population in Trincomalee roughly equal to the Tamil population. The SLMC, led by Rauff Hakeem, will likely come to an arrangement with the UNP in selected districts. Hakeem's main Muslim competitor, Ferial Ashraff's National Unity Alliance, a member of the government, will probably come to a similar understanding with the President's SLFP.

¶13. (U) On March 18, a Batticaloa district TNA MP said that the party will not contest the elections, as the TNA "steadfastly opposed the de-merger of the North Eastern Provincial Council in January 2007" by the GSL. The MP cited Indian Prime Minister Singh's late 2006 "commitment to the restoration of the merged North-East." The TNA is expected to release an official statement soon after the return of its parliamentary group leader Sampanthan from India.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: It is encouraging that all political parties, with the significant exception of the TNA, are planning to contest the May 10 Eastern Provincial Council elections. Embassy remains concerned, however, that the

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short deadline will leave little time to resolve deficiencies noted in the local elections process - the failure to disarm and demobilize paramilitaries, threats and violence against some candidates, and voter intimidation. Two important thresholds for a more free and fair election in May would be: 1) the credible disarming of all paramilitaries operating in the east; and 2) a critical mass of parties from all parts of the spectrum to contest the election. Under these circumstances, there is a chance that the voters of the Eastern Province will have the opportunity to make a free choice. The conduct of these elections will be an important test of the government's resolve to move toward empowerment of its minorities, a critical and so far largely missing element in its strategy to address the root causes of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

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